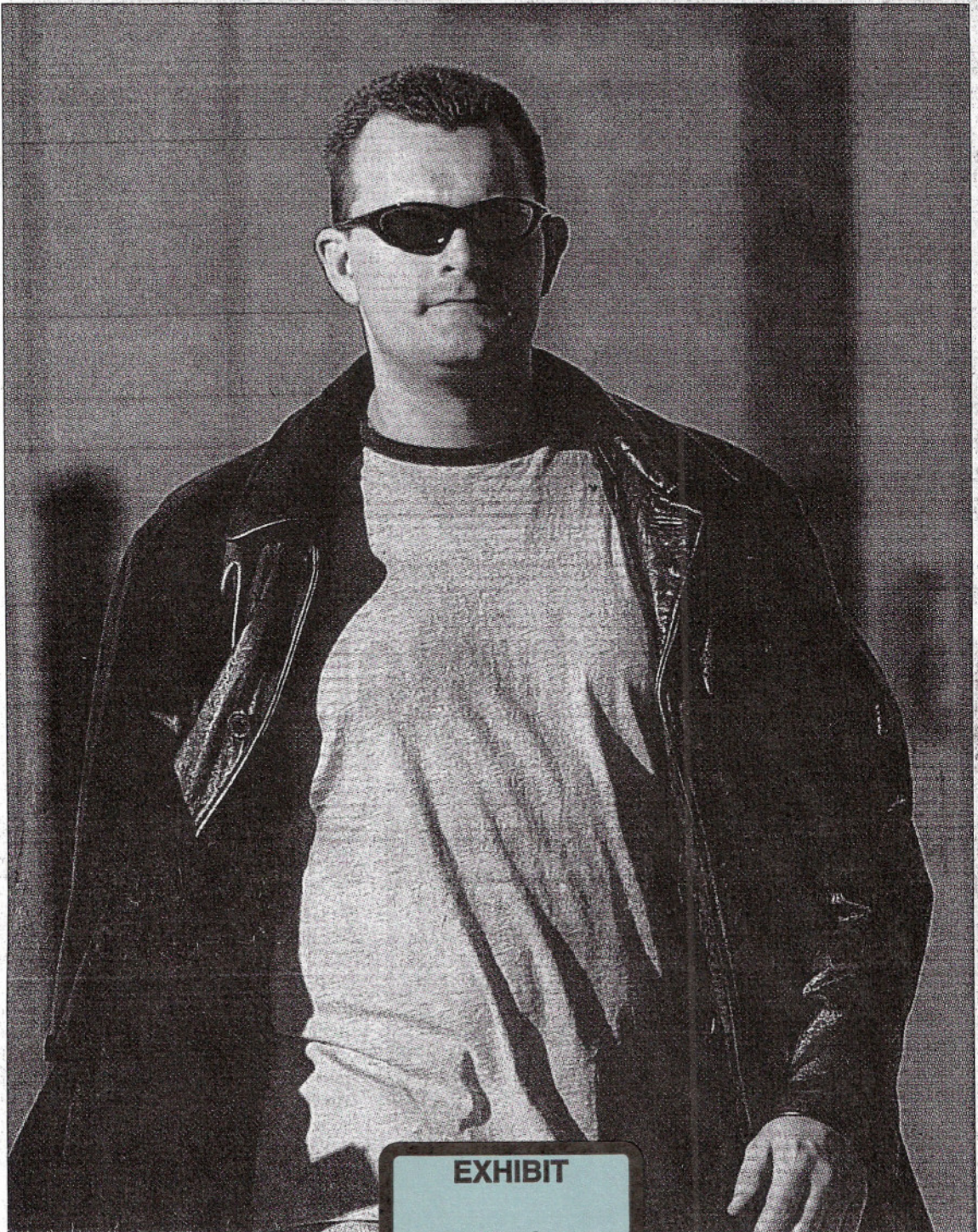


Giving himself up and pleading guilty
in Jessie Lee Williams case,

SECOND JAILER ADMITS ABUSE



EXHIBIT

No. 6

The defendants

The federal government now has three defendants, all former corrections officers, in a criminal case involving inmate abuse at the Harrison County jail and the Feb. 4 fatal beating of inmate Jessie Lee Williams Jr.

■ **Morgan Lee Thompson:** Waived indictment and pleaded guilty Tuesday to conspiracy to deprive rights under color of law. Sentencing is Jan. 30. Maximum penalty is 10 years in prison.



Rhodes

■ **Regina Lynn Rhodes:** Waived indictment and pleaded guilty Aug. 8 to deprivation of rights under color of law and to falsifying information. Sentencing is pending. Maximum penalty is 13 years in prison.



Teel

■ **Ryan Teel:** Arrested Aug. 28, has pleaded not guilty to deprivation of rights under color of law in an attempt to kill and to destruction, alteration or falsification of records in a federal investigation. Trial set for May 28. Faces life prison sentence on one count and up to 20 years in prison on the other. Prosecutors have until Feb. 16 to decide if they wish to seek the death penalty.

He discloses he assaulted more than 100 inmates

By **ROBIN FITZGERALD**

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GULFPORT — A former corrections officer has admitted he assaulted more than 100 inmates at the Harrison County jail and observed co-conspirators in "hundreds of additional assaults" on jail inmates.

In a guilty plea entered Tuesday, Morgan Lee Thompson admitted he and co-conspirators used excessive and unnecessary force, bragged about it and covered up the incidents. Thompson, 29, also admitted he restrained Jessie Lee Williams Jr. for an unjustified beating Feb. 4, two days before the inmate's death.

Thompson, appearing Tuesday before U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola Jr., pleaded guilty to a criminal information and waived his right to indictment. A criminal

Please see Jailer, A-13

Jailer

Continued from A-1

information is a written list of accusations federal prosecutors could present to a grand jury if a suspect refuses to admit responsibility.

Thompson said little other than to answer yes or no to questions from Guirola.

Thompson remains free on \$25,000 bond. His sentencing is set for Jan. 30 at 9 a.m.

Thompson, now a security officer, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to deprivation of rights under color of law. The maximum penalty is 10 years in prison, a fine of up to \$250,000 and no fewer than three years of post-release supervision.

He worked at the jail, mainly in the booking room, from May 17, 2004, until Sept. 25, when he resigned. Thompson admitted the inmate assaults continued until at least Aug. 28. That is the date former jailer Ryan Teel was arrested on criminal charges related to Williams' beating. Former jailer Regina Rhodes had pleaded guilty earlier in August to related accusations.

Thompson admitted he helped restrain Williams while Rhodes and Teel struck, punched and choked Williams.

Williams, 40, lost consciousness and died two days later.

A wrongful-death lawsuit for Williams' estate has been delayed, but Thompson's guilty plea in the criminal case is "a step in the right direction," said Michael W. Crosby, estate attorney.

"This is the beginning of restoring the public's confidence in law enforcement at the county jail," Crosby said.

District Attorney Cono Caranna said he won't prosecute Thompson on state charges if the former jailer continues to cooperate with the federal investigation.

Caranna called Thompson's plea "a very significant development. This demonstrates that the federal government is taking this case very seriously and is taking the investigation wherever it leads."

Williams' family members sat shoulder to shoulder in the courtroom, dropping their heads at references to Williams' assault.

Thompson admitted he submitted "false, misleading and intentionally vague" information in the Williams report and in interviews Feb. 8 with state investigators and June 14 with the FBI.

His attorney, James Farrior, declined comment after the hearing.

U.S. had fears of misuse of force

Letter was sent in mid-2005

By **ROBIN FITZGERALD**
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GULFPORT — Papers recently filed in federal court show the U.S. Justice Department notified Harrison County officials in mid-2005 of concerns about misuse of force, overcrowding, security and health issues at the Harrison County jail.



Payne

Since then, an inmate has died after an officer-involved beating and two more civil lawsuits are alleging inmate injuries through unjustified force. Also, two former corrections officers await resolution of criminal charges involving the inmate's fatal beating.

The letter in question was attached

Please see Letter, A-6

THE LETTER

Below is summary of what the U.S. Justice Department had to say about overcrowding and unsafe operations at the Harrison County jail in a letter dated July 20, 2005:

■ Inmate disciplinary infractions

"soared" from about 20 per 100 inmates in December 2003 to about 75 infractions per 100 inmates by December 2004.

■ Use of force by staff

"substantially increased as a result of the serious strain (of) overcrowding," with 3 of about 10 incidents involving use of chemical agents in December 2003 to 14 of 31 incidents involving use of chemical agents in December 2004.

■ Misuse of force

According to reports filed since 1997, Justice noticed "only one misapplication of the use of force." However, the latest visit "revealed 'a very disturbing pattern of misuse of force.' With regards to at least four incidents, we have serious concerns over the nature of the misuse of force, the lack of appropriate review of the incidents and the failure to properly investigate the incidents."

Misdemeanor population

increased from 94 to 213 between April 1, 2004, and Nov. 15, 2004, with misdemeanor offenders (unpaid fines, public drunk, disorderly conduct and traffic violations) "tying up precious bed space for significant periods of time" along with pre-trial detainees.

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Letter

Continued from A-1

to Sheriff George H. Payne Jr.'s response to a federal order to explain what is being done about understaffing at the overcrowded county jail. U.S. District Judge Walter J. Gex III, who oversees a 1995 federal consent agreement to solve problems at the jail, ordered the response last month.

The letter is addressed to Payne and the county attorney, Joe Meadows. However, Meadows on Friday said he knew nothing about the letter and had no copy of it in his file. The Sun Herald provided him with a copy.

"I can assure you, I would have remembered it if I had received it," Meadows said.

Meadows said he provides copies of such letters to the county supervisors. They will get a copy Monday, he said.

The staffing issues are being addressed aggressively, Payne said Friday, but emphasized

that the letter is no cause for alarm.

The Justice Department letter, dated July 20, 2005, noted "a very disturbing pattern of misuse of force" at the jail. It also raised concerns about medical and mental-health issues, including concerns about methicillin-resistant staph infections.

"Most of those issues have been solved or are being solved," Payne said. "Dr. Don Cabana (the new warden) has a good plan in place and we believe we have solved most of the problems to Justice's satisfaction and we are working on solving the others."

The court document responding to Gex's concerns about hiring raises three issues: low wages, a smaller labor pool since Hurricane Katrina, and a work environment that is not attractive to many job hunters.

Starting pay at the jail for a corrections officer is \$10.71 an hour. In comparison, the document notes starting wages at area businesses such as Lowe's and Home Depot are \$12 to \$15

an hour.

In a four-month period ending Oct. 1, the jail received 36 applications, hired 24 and received 27 resignations, according to the response submitted by the sheriff's attorney, Cy Faneca.

"While vacancies remain unacceptably high, we are now getting a steady stream of applicants, which had not been the case previously, which is a very positive sign," the response said.

The jail has been running about 65 officers short of the recommended 1-to-10 ratio of corrections officers to inmates.

Eight more corrections officers have been hired in the past week.

The jail is spending more than \$8,000 a week on advertising job vacancies.

The July 2005 letter states the Justice Department is willing to dismiss the federal consent agreement from 1995 if jail officials can reduce the inmate population to its safe operating capacity of 760. The daily jail population has averaged 950 to

1,000 inmates for several years.

The letter attributes "a significant part of the overcrowding problem" to "a large number of misdemeanor offenders" held at the jail.

Gex's recent order did not request an update of the July 2005 concerns about use of force or medical and mental-health problems. Payne said those issues are being dealt with separately and that the letter was included as a matter of record.

Justice Department representatives inspect the jail "at least twice a year," Payne said. "We have an ongoing dialogue with Justice and at this point in time, they like what we're trying to do."

The July 2005 letter credited the sheriff for seeking advice from the National Institute of Justice and credited the medical-care provider, Health Assurances LLC, with doing a good job of "transitioning" as the new health-care provider for inmates "while maintaining staff morale."

ATTORNEY: ABUSE CONTINUED AFTER WILLIAMS' DEATH

Thomas Preston Wills, a former corrections officer at the Harrison County Adult Detention Center, leaves the Dan M. Russell Jr. United States Federal Courthouse in Gulfport on Wednesday after pleading guilty to conspiring to deprive inmates of their civil rights.



Fourth ex-jailer pleads guilty

By **ROBIN FITZGERALD**

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GULFPORT — A fourth ex-jailer has pleaded guilty to conspiring to deprive Harrison County jail inmates of their civil rights, but in Wednesday's plea, a federal trial attorney said he can prove the abuse continued for at least two months after an inmate's fatal beating.

Thomas Preston Wills, 25, worked at the jail booking room from November 2002 until April 6. He wasn't on duty on Feb. 4, when Jessie Lee Williams Jr. was assaulted by jailers in the booking room.

However, evidence shows a pattern of abuse existed at the jail at least until Wills left his position as a corrections officer, federal attorney John Richmond said Wednesday. Richmond said he also can prove that Wills participated in more than 100 assaults, observed 100 or more other inmate assaults and heard co-workers brag about their actions.

Wills pleaded guilty to a one-count information, a list of accusations, and agreed to cooperate with the investigation. He faces up to 10 years in prison, a fine of up to \$250,000 and up to three years of post-release supervision. His sentencing is tentatively set for 9 a.m. March 12, 2007.

The conspiracy, according to Richmond,

involved "unreasonable and excessive physical force" with co-conspirators "striking, punching, kicking, choking and otherwise assaulting inmates."

Wills and co-conspirators concealed the acts with false reports or with vague or misleading reports, Richmond said.

U.S. District Judge Louis Guirola Jr. sealed Wills' plea agreement. Prosecutors said Guirola did so because of a recent Supreme Court ruling that involved Internet access to information that can identify potential defendants.

Wills, wearing a dark, pin-striped suit with red tie and matching handkerchief, was soft-spoken as he answered questions at a bond hearing before Chief Magistrate Judge John M. Roper and as he entered his plea before Guirola.

Wills previously worked at casino resorts in room service and as a bellman. He told Guirola he received just one week of corrections training at the jail, three days with a field training officer and intermittent courses during his employment.

"That's pretty much it," Wills said.

Wills initially denied any wrongdoing, according to his attorney, David Morrison.

"He now realizes the behavior was wrong," said Morrison, "and he is remorseful with a feeling of sadness. He offers his most heartfelt apologies to all."

Wills is free on an unsecured \$25,000 bond.

"He was afforded the opportunity to resign rather than face termination," said warden Don Cabana, returning a phone call for Sheriff George

Please see Abuse, A-8

Abuse

Continued from A-1

H. Payne Jr.

Cabana, a former state prison official, accepted Payne's appointment as warden in mid-August.

"The jail is in much better shape now than it was in February," Cabana said.

Attorney Michael W. Crosby, representing Williams' estate in a pending wrongful-death civil lawsuit, called Wills' plea "a significant development that

supports our claims. The sheriff should have known what was happening, yet the abuse continued after Jessie was killed."

Payne's attorney, Cy Faneca, called the latest development "surprising," but said, "the investigative process is part of justice. The sheriff and I are confident that justice will prevail."

Faneca said he could not address questions on the accountability of jail supervisors because he represents the sheriff in civil matters.

"This is a criminal matter," Faneca said.